

# The Control of Policy and Practice: The Case of the Core Curriculum

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**Abstract:** The idea of a carefully managed curriculum, tightly controlled, has been with us for some time and for all the changes has remained focussed on the 'core curriculum' of English, Maths and Science. Questions remain whether this policy has been successful in terms of pupil performance. At the least, the central tenets of a core curriculum should expect to be understood by the pupils. In order to test this, 195 semi-structured interviews were undertaken with pupils representing the socio-economic differences of the population as a whole. The interviews explored in depth what they understood of the core curriculum, how relevant it was, whether it helped them to develop skills and whether it would support their future aspirations. The results were disturbing.

## Introduction

The growing international emphasis on educational policy has created a rhetoric of its own. There is an assumption that the 'reform' of education is vital to economic growth and that a 'learning society' consists

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International Journal of Educational Policy, Research, & Practice, Volume 5, Number 1, Spring 2004. ISSN 1528-3534; Copyright 2004 by Caddo Gap Press; All rights of reproduction reserved.

of the flexible skills of a new workforce in which the future (and the competition) lies. The notion of 'reform' derives from the constant criticism of the status quo as if all those in education are failing to perform. All aspects of educational system come under scrutiny in a sign of centralisation. The policy makers wish to be in control. They blame the 'status quo' to justify their interference. Whatever their reasons, we see the centralisation of education in nearly all developed countries.

One sign of the desire to control, certainly in the United Kingdom, is the manipulation of educational research. The way this has happened is typical. First there were reports of the low standards of research, how irrelevant it was to practitioners and how badly carried out (Tooley, 1998). This was followed by the demand that in order to raise standards, research needed to be made more instrumental to justify the policy makers and to demonstrate what works best. At the same time, the rhetoric of 'research based policy,' actually nearer policy-led research, was used to justify the proposal of centering all educational research in a few centres of excellence. These were promoted as being independent of government interference but would, in fact, be as independent as other QUANGOs, as independent, that is as the suppliers of goods to Sainsburys or Wal-Mart.

The phenomenon of centralised control is widespread. Whilst research studies have demonstrated that such close interference with practice has the opposite effect to that intended (Dalin et al, 1994) many more have shown at how many different levels the politicians are in control. There are ironies in this. The ideologies of market forces and the independence of management continue to be furthered, but in matters of the curriculum, the outcomes and even styles of teaching, the central government is firmly in command. The United Kingdom might be an extreme case (Alexander, 2000) but it is not alone in seeking to create a uniform system, tightly managed. The justification for such an approach lies in the suspicion of what was called the 'secret garden' of the curriculum. There was suspicion that what was being taught was not in agreement with the agenda of the government.

This centralisation of policy is rarely questioned. The language used to justify it, like 'raising standards,' makes those who have their doubts sound as if they wish to lower them or, equally culpable in the metaphysics of this outlook, return to the past. All in the education system are supposed to be accountable. Not only must they perform better and better, meeting ever more demanding targets but also will they be inspected to make sure they are doing so. In the United Kingdom, it is not only schools that are being held to account in this type of inspection, but they are perhaps most subject to league tables, special measures (which means being taken over by government representatives) and being 'named and shamed'.

Control is manifested through inspection by a centralised office for standards in education (Ofsted). This is the result of a carefully worked out managerial approach which strike some outsiders as surprising, if not necessarily effective (Grubb, 1999). The result of centralisation has all kinds of implications to the professionalism of teachers and to their development (Pring, 2002).

From the publication of a report on how teachers should deliver the curriculum to the introduction of literacy and numeracy hours, teacher actions have been detailed to the last minute (Alexander, Rose, & Woodhead, 1992). For many people, it is curious to think back on a time when there was no such political manipulation and when policy was driven by professionals within the system rather than by amateurs outside it. The gulf between practitioners and policy makers has never been wider.

The history of centralised control in its present form can be traced back in Great Britain to the concern with a core curriculum. In 1976, the Prime Minister of the time made a speech (the 'Ruskin' speech, named after a Trades Union College rather than the sage). He criticised the fluid nature of the subjects studied in school; the lack of utility of what was studied and the need to have a debate about what was central to any curriculum. Since this time, culminating in the National Curriculum, which was introduced through the Educational Reform Act (sic) of 1988, the assumption that there should be uniformity and control of what is learned as a policy, has been almost taken for granted. Every slight amendment to the original structure only points up how massive remains the weight of the curriculum, testable at key stages from one to four, all taken before the main national terminal examinations.

The idea of a 'core' curriculum still remains. There are three subjects; English, Maths and Science, which are deemed to be most important. They dominate the timetable and are invoked as being the essential requirements for employability. English, Maths, and Science are predicated on essential skills like reading, writing and arithmetic and they remain symbolic of all else that is required from the potential workforce. The government clearly believes in their centrality and the efficacy of the policy of promoting them. For years these subjects have been given the time, the resources and the rhetorical support to make their dominance complete. After such a time, their utility should be deeply embedded in the minds of pupils and standards will have risen, but have they?

There are two main ways of researching the question of whether this policy of delivering the core curriculum is successful or not. One is through comparisons either with the past or with other countries. Either comparison is problematic. To test exactly the same thing in different times or indifferent cultures is virtually impossible, although this does

not prevent politicians invoking international comparisons. Many of the measures of comparison, like mathematical achievement tests, look attractive but are deeply flawed. How can one measure different numbers of different cohorts of students in exactly the same way; even in these standard tests like those of arithmetic, let alone the more complex ones of thinking skills, motivations or attrition. International comparisons are the blunt instruments used by politicians alternatively to blame the teachers for under-performing or to praise themselves for the success of their policies.

The real measures of success should be in comparison with the past; are standards actually rising thanks to the policies? Again, measuring this is problematic. How does one demonstrate this? In rising numbers of those who attain targets or the more jaundiced opinions of employers who lament falling standards? The results are announced at the same time, as demonstrating either the greater numbers of pupils passing the examinations or lowering standards required according to taste or political prejudice.

There is, however, another way of exploring the results of the policies surrounding the curriculum and that is to explore the experience of those pupils who are the target of them.

After all, the belief in the ideal is constantly before us: highly articulate, numerate school-leavers who understand what they are studying and why, and who are imbibed with all the notions of enterprise and the competition of the market. It is the effects on pupils' thinking that need to be researched.

## Methodology

One of the results of centralisation and the regimes of inspection is the collection of an enormous amount of data. In the government vaults in London lie details of every classroom of every school in the country, in test results and inspectors' reports. Surrounding this core of information are numerous associated reports on other educational institutions including the private sector and other measures, like details of reported truancy and exclusion.

There are also profiles of schools in terms of the number of staff absentees and the number of free school meals, the crude measure of socio-economic deprivation. Much of this information is used to highlight success or failure in terms of meeting the government targets of outcomes, published in either league tables, to see which institutions come out on top and which are the lowest of the low, or in reports from Ofsted. Yet there is a plethora of information that remains inaccessible.

Gaining access to even the general measurements beyond examination results is difficult. There is a general fear of the uses to which information might be put (Cullingford & Swift, 2002).

The information that has been so assiduously gathered is also ignored because it does not really reveal very much. In broad terms it gives a picture of the state of various schools including those which give cause for concern.

It does suggest exactly why certain institutions are failing beyond reiterating the impact of socio-economic circumstances. The question of what exactly is being learned and why, remains untouched, together with any hint of the personal experience of pupils. The reliance on data that is easily measurable is deliberate. Many questions about the real impact of policies, like the core curriculum, remain unanswered.

The approach taken in this research is quite different. It relies on an ethnographical approach, exploring the issues through questioning and listening to the pupils whilst they analyse their experiences. Before giving a brief description on the methodology, two facts must be made clear.

One is the importance of the sample in representing different socio-economic groups and minority ethnic groups as well as gender balance. This is in quantifiable data. The second is the importance of the analysis and its reporting. Whilst illuminative quotations from individuals are presented is significant in their own right, they summarise the views of many. They are not 'cherry-picked' at random out of a mass of data. What is presented are the consistent and widespread views agreed by all the subjects in the sample. In every interview it was important that the same subjects were covered by all.

The semi-structured interviews were based on some clear principles. The first was that the subjects should not guess what the interviewer wanted to research. There were no leading questions or signs of raised expectations around particular topics. The direction of the interview, with 'why?' the leading marker, followed the interest of the pupils, whilst making sure that whatever the order and whatever the length, the interview would cover the same topics.

The central ethical point is the respect for the pupil being interviewed to take seriously what they are saying and to give them every chance to reveal what is of importance to them without any sense of potential retribution or criticism. In the extreme application of the notion of informed consent, the interviewees would be shown the transcripts and discuss them further but this would mean the manipulation of evidence, which is a graver ethical problem.

The opening questions were always neutral and allowed the individual pupil to reflect on whatever was on his or her mind, which

inevitably included the immediate experiences of school, from individual lessons to social life, before exploring further their reflection on the overall summaries of their lives and their meanings.

There were 195 lengthy semi-structured individual interviews carried out in small private rooms. The interviews took place during school time and within one of the schools that represented, in the measures used by both public and private data gatherers, the typical spread of the population as a whole. The interviews were confidential and the anonymity of the individuals, as well as the schools, preserved. The pupils knew that anything they said would not be passed on to anyone in authority, either close to them or elsewhere. In these conditions, the young people welcomed the rare opportunity to talk about themselves, their experiences and their attitudes.

They were taken from years ten and eleven just before the students' last compulsory public examinations, the GCSEs, taken at around 16 years of age. This meant there was a mixture of pupils who saw the examinations in a positive light, as a passport to continuing success and those for whom they represented a culmination of failure. Half of the pupils intended to go on to further study and the other half to enter immediately into some kind of employment.

The consistency of the results must be emphasised. What emerges is a representative picture of the experiences of a wide range of young people, given an opportunity to reflect and to analyse. They were not encouraged to be critical. On the contrary, the tone of the interviews was to explore the experience of school in the positive light of the relevance of what they had learned to their futures. The analysis of the transcripts was complex and required many re-readings and interrogating in terms of different levels of a typology of subjects covered, of broad attitudes, of signs of sources of information, and of the tone and emotional intelligence displayed.

### Findings and Discussion

The idea of a core curriculum has been at the heart of policy for many years. Whilst the National Curriculum stated that the acquisition of knowledge should be 'broad and balanced' and even include at least a token of aesthetic and moral input, the most important outcomes for pupils leaving school were addressed in terms of the core 'skills' of English, Mathematics and Science. Science has been to some extent an afterthought, more significant in the rhetoric than in the delivery in school, whether because of shortage of equipment or more particularly qualified staff or because it is less easily classified in terms of demonstrable 'skills.'

There is an ambiguity about the relationship of 'subjects' to 'skills.' The subjects on the National Curriculum are divided into traditional disciplines in terms of knowledge. Within some of them, and this is itself significant, there are certain abilities that are supposed to be acquired and transferred to other circumstances. Thinking skills or critical skills play no part in these. The skills of using tools, however, do. Most important are the learning tools of being able to read and write and do arithmetic.

The argument is twofold; that such skills underpin all other subjects and that they are the ones that pupils will most need in their subsequent employment and their social lives. The emphasis on the manipulation of language and number is symbolised by the statutory orders that insist on literacy and numeracy hours carefully controlled and prescribed.

The ancient 'three Rs' still reign supreme. The government, through the media, constantly reiterates the importance of the core curriculum. That the message is received even by pupils in primary school is clear (Jefferey). They are aware of the catechism, the significance of the core skills for employment from the time they enter formal schooling (Cullingford, 1991). One of the central edicts of schooling is that pupils should be aware of the essential competencies and that all other matters are comparatively unimportant. Pupils themselves might have different interpretations of the significance of particular skills, especially those they find most useful to them but they also recognise the formal requirements of the educational system (Cullingford, 2002).

We have hinted here that there are distinctions made by pupils between those skills they are required to learn and those that they personally find most useful. This distinction is important like that between the formal and the hidden curriculum, between what they are officially supposed to learn and what they do. Whilst we uncover the layers and meanings attached to the core curriculum, it should be borne in mind throughout the discussion that the shared consistent understanding that pupils demonstrated is that they accept the importance of the core curriculum because they are told to. It is something given to them. The core subjects are important because that is the official line and because the experience of school is dominated by them, not because pupils are necessarily convinced. In the whole edifice of the National Curriculum the pupils suggest that it is something to which they must submit themselves.

In the interviews the pupils were asked to explain two things. The first was to cite what were the most important subjects in terms of the National Curriculum. The second was to say why we could only hint at the alternative insights into what was important to the pupils in relation to their own lives. The subject now is the pupils' understanding of the

central curriculum. They were able to consistently and immediately cite English and Maths, to which the majority of pupils add Science. When asked why, they react with some puzzlement. It is a question that no-one has asked before. Indeed, the whole purpose of the curriculum, let alone schooling, has never been a matter for discussion. The core curriculum, in their eyes, simply exists. It is a given. It is in fact presented to them again and again, without explanation or questioning. There are no choices.

One essential message of the educational system is encapsulated here: the subject matter is laid down. Its purpose is never explored. The pupils submit to it. This might be the deliberate intention of schooling or it might be inadvertent but it is what pupils learn.

When there is something which is so essential it has to be taken seriously. English and Mathematics dominate the school day and homework. They are the subjects that are the most associated with carrying out set tasks, with producing work and testing. When asked whether these subjects are useful, the pupils react as if, at one level if not a personal one, that is a given.

"English and Science. That's what everyone who goes to English and Science is important, you should do well in that. It's good."

"Even the teachers sometimes say it's quite hard. Its in English where you have all those assignments and you have to make sure they have all the ideas and everything returned in the paragraphs and everything and how you set it out, that's more challenging." (F10 year 10)

Some of the flavour of English is brought out and the attitudes towards it. 'Even the teachers' acknowledge the demands and the challenge, which includes both the assignments ('all of them') and the details such as 'paragraphs' and how you set it out. The assignments must have ideas as well as be properly presented. That you 'should' do well is clear. The sense of the utility of the core curriculum is constantly conveyed.

The subjects are paraded as important because they are seen as the essential requirement for what will happen after school.

"English will be one and I suppose Maths would be like... I'm rubbish... May be Science, depends what I do after. They seem more important. In different jobs like English would be writing a lot because most of that we do; it would be important. I don't know really." (F10)

That there is a given core and that these are important is accepted. The real reasons for this, when pressed, are harder to come by. 'Working a lot' is what pupils do in school and very few will repeat that experience. Yet that is what is linked to different jobs because that is what has been imbibed. The fact that the core is presented as compulsory itself makes a significant impression.

“English and Maths are compulsory and that’s what you need most... and then Art because I wouldn’t mind taking an Art degree or something.” (M10)

Whatever the personal future, what you ‘need’ is what is compulsory. All jobs or degrees are assumed to depend on them.

“English, Maths, Science. I don’t know. It depends what type of work you want to go into... because they’re like your core subjects aren’t they? They carry you to get anywhere or out.” (F10)

All is dependent on the central subjects; ‘they carry you anywhere’, whatever type of work. The message has been clearly conveyed.

“Maths, English and Science and the job that I’ve just lined up there’s no real thing you need... because those are the ones that you have to take.” (M10)

The distinction between the utility or the subjects and the compulsion to take them is here clearly made, although the two matters often overlap. The point of the compulsion is, after all, because of their perceived utility, as necessary points of entry into the next stage and as essential skills. What is ‘needed’ merges into what is given.

“Art, Science, English and Maths... because they are the most important to me. The best thing that I think I’m best at is Art and the other three subjects are what I need to know.” (M10)

There are then, three subjects which are perceived as being ‘necessary,’ although these do not coincide with those subjects that are preferred, that pupils are good at or which relate to their own personal interests or future. Why are these important or necessary? This is because that is what they are told. “People say so.” If there is any sense of purpose conveyed in the curriculum, it is the idea that some subjects are essential than others, however interesting, and peripheral. There is a hierarchy of human knowledge that is dominated by the utilitarian imperative of being able to read, write and count. The dominance of the core curriculum is a *sine qua non*.

“I think any Sciences will be or my English. Well I want to be a Scientist but everybody says English is important so...” (F10)

Certain subjects are ‘the main ones.’ The reasons have never been articulated.

“Probably Maths and English, probably and Sciences. I don’t know because to get into college like Maths and that’s quite useful aren’t they? I don’t know really. They always sound as though sort of like... and English are your main subjects and that.” (M10)

Reasons for the domination of the core are far harder to find than the acceptance of the fact. They have to be 'useful.' They 'sound' as if they are, because that is the tintinnabulation of reasons that echo in their consciousness. Subjects are important according to the number of times people have told them that it is so.

"English and Maths ... because you need them to ... I don't know why. I've never really thought." (M10)

"Maths, English, Science ... Modern Languages. I can't remember all the others because I've been told by the teachers." (M10)

Time and again, the subjects are cited with ease. This is followed by not knowing why they are given, beyond the acceptance of the statement of fact. Those in authority say that English, Maths and Science are central and that they have to be accepted as such.

"Maths, Science and I suppose English. I don't know. People ... teachers and mates." (M10)

"A lot of people look at those. It's like most people do 'em." (M11)

These are the phrases that keep reiterating. The most crucial fact of the core curriculum is that the essential explanation lies not in the reasoned arguments for their usefulness but in the fact that many people keep reiterating their importance. It is an unquestionable fact of schooling, if not their experience.

Pupils are constantly attempting to make sense of their education in their own way. Just as home life is kept psychologically separate from school, so is the multiple consciousness of meaning; the formality of school is rarely explored privately any more than the inner worlds of pupils are ever brought into play. The conclusions drawn about the rite of passage that is schooling is that it is all geared to the outcome, all given meaning only by what happens next, when pupils are freed to go on, to employment or to further study. It follows that there has to be a connection for them between the core curriculum and jobs. In the absence of any other explanation this has to do.

"I'll have knowledge of what sort of things go on and that and you need English and Maths in most jobs." (F10)

"Maths, I'm not sure about French because I don't think I'll be taking anything like that. May be English, Geography might be. English and Maths because they're good subjects if you're going for a job or something. They look for things like that." (M10)

In the careful consideration of various subjects in the curriculum, like Business Studies, potentially of direct relevance to vocational

training, it is the core that stands out as being required for jobs. Pupils have heard that future employers 'look for things like that.' It is an argument that has been restarted often enough. If it is not the employers that are cited, the influence can also come from nearer home.

"Probably Maths and English because I want to do a trade in things like my Dad does. He said you need good qualifications in Maths and English so I have tried doing well in those." (M10)

The reasons for the relevance of the core curriculum to jobs are mostly given, as they are qualifications demanded by people. They 'seem' important. "You need these qualifications for most jobs" (F10). There are, however, attempts made to explore this connection a little further.

"Maths and English mostly because when you get a job, you mostly have to add things and stuff. English—you have to spell right and put your words in the right places and stuff. Well, Maths and English probably." (F10)

It is the utility of the subjects that is deemed most significant, the practical matters of spelling and punctuation and adding up. When the core curriculum is described, it is in neutral terms. There is no sense of necessary enlightenment or excitement. It is the tasks, the assignments, and above all the skills that are important. In the literacy hours, it is the ability to develop competence, to command the basic requirements of written communication that is stressed beyond oral communication or the development of argument (Alexander, 2000). The skills are practical not critical (Quinn, 1997).

The core curriculum also develops distinct attitudes towards jobs. In the minds of pupils, employment is clearly associated with the competencies of writing, spelling, and adding up. The idea that there might be either applicable knowledge or the ability to develop ideas to engage in a critical dialogue or explore new intellectual territories is missing.

Employment is mentioned often but never in such terms of creativity or imagination. The core curriculum has emphasised this essentially practical rather than the assumption that such skills could be put to a higher purpose. The core curriculum is what you need because that is what is demanded of you.

"Maths and English. They're important. Science but I'm not very good at it. If you want to get a good job and everything to go to university, you need Maths and English. You need good grades in them to get what you want." (F10)

The acquisition of good grades is the understood purpose of schooling, especially in Mathematics and English. The idea is often repeated.

"Because Maths, Science and English are the major GCSE ones... (for me) Home Economics-Food because I want to be a Chef." (M10)

It is perhaps inevitable that when pupils are asked about the purpose of school they are somewhat at a loss to know where to begin. This comes about partly because such a subject is never mentioned in school. If it is, the discussion takes place with fellow pupils. If teachers discuss a subject at least in the parameters of their own subjects, this not conveyed to pupils. What pupils pick up are some essential messages about having to survive in a fierce, competitive world. "You're on your own." In order to equip them for this, they are given the knowledge and skills of the curriculum. Further discussion (if not further contemplation) is deemed unnecessary, since the main subjects are 'given' and pupils are not listened to anyway. Instead they try to do their best to understand for themselves the relationship of their own experience and the curriculum as presented by the schooling system.

If English, Maths, and Science have to be accepted as the core curriculum, it is because they are marketed as those subjects most in demand by future employers or by future education. The latent reason is that they entail the practical tools for everyday survival. Pupils therefore try to make sense of the subjects as those, which best equip them for essential survival skills. They become a 'core' in a different sense, at least necessary and at best, even useful.

"Some Maths, but we do some Maths that what you're not going to need at all at our school, like algebra, you're not going to need that. I don't know because I'm not quite sure what I want to do yet. Well, English is just everyday to day life and Maths, you've got to know if somebody gives you the right change... and some of it is stupid." (F10)

The problem with the concentration on competencies and utilities is that the reasons behind them can be interpreted at a low level. Life skills become a matter of reading the tax return or checking change. Anything which does not have immediate relevance, like algebra, is deemed secondary and of less significance. That pupils want to study what is relevant to them is clear (White with Brockington). That they long for a sense of purpose is also clear. Pupils are informed that their needs of relevance and purpose are met by the core curriculum and they do their best to interpret this fact. Utility is all.

"Maths and English because you use Maths everyday in your life. I don't know. Maths; I know that better than I did before. I know most things about English ... on computer." (M10)

One reason for studying is preparation for examinations. This is itself

a justification for whatever is learned, seemingly relevant or not. It does, however, call into question the underlying reasons for the relevance of any subject, if interest or excitement is left out. If the core curriculum is presented as the essential and the most important this could undermine other subjects. More significantly, if the core is explained in terms of practical utility, other subjects will be even more easily questioned. If 'relevance' means skills, then why study History? The fact that pupils do like certain subjects and find them more useful than English, Maths and Science does not change the central hegemony of a utilitarian core. It does give pupils an excuse to find subjects they do not enjoy irrelevant.

"I just find them difficult but I don't think they're interesting. I can't see what learning about the structure of a molecule is going to do for me when I leave. I can't see myself going round the supermarket and saying 'well, that's made up of it.'" (F11)

Part of the sense of oppression that is felt by pupils in school derives from the very fact of compulsion. It is a duty to which they must submit. Part of it is also due to the way in which the curriculum is 'delivered.' It is not for negotiation. It is, in its core elements, deemed too important to be discussed. Even if one were to come to the conclusion that the three subjects that make up the core curriculum were the most important, it would still suggest an outcome which is one-sided and implacable. The core curriculum is no longer a matter for debate. It is presented as the essential tools and to make sure it happens, the examination system is used to check it. There is no escaping the requirement. Student teachers are given Maths tests, which must be passed in order to qualify as teachers, whatever their other virtues.

In the face of such central demands, pupils do adapt in two ways, at the same time. They accept the facts and submit to the notion that English, Maths and Science are essential. That is what they are told, so it must be so. The subjects dominate the timetable and the assignments and that is a fact, which establishes the importance without the need for debate. The second way in which pupils adapt, is to find their own more personal idiosyncratic meanings. They know which skills and which subjects are most important to them. School is therefore a schizophrenic experience of both public and private accountability.

The subjects that are deemed important are not always those relevant to them.

"Because I want to do something like Business Studies or something. I want to do something with computers or in an office or something, so they're basically what I need because I don't think you need Art in an office." (F10)

The emphasis on utilitarian skills, especially towards the end of the compulsory school means that pupils are encouraged to think in terms of applicable outcomes; those things that are of immediate relevance to them. Those subjects, which do not meet the criteria, become dull. Others, like the uses of business of computers dominate their thinking. Instead of an excitement of learning for their own sake, the idea of useful skills still dominates. If these are applied to their own personal sense of purpose, then their significance is enhanced. Skills that pupils recognise are those which unlike pure knowledge can be transferred.

"Map reading! Calculate things... if I wanted to get something for my home to calculate things. Knowing where I'm going, knowing how to use things that I can communicate well now. I'm not shy. I used to be really shy. Speaking skills. I've got used to then skills now, all general skills but I don't know the other things." (F11)

What this girl has really learned in school are those social skills like the confidence to communicate, that she has had to discover for herself. Emotional abilities, like social skills are not part of the core curriculum.

### Conclusion

At the heart of the control of the curriculum lies the idea of a core of subjects deemed essential, which everyone must take. The implicit argument for this core is that it equips pupils with the necessary skills without which they will not be able to cope in everyday life, in employment or in further study. Pupils submit to this fact but they also learn other inadvertent facts. One is the lack of freedom, which they have over their own learning. Another is the domination of applicable, instrumental skills rather than any excitement in learning or in those places or subjects they could be applied. The core curriculum is associated first and foremost with assignments and with examinations. If pupils feel a sense of oppression in school, the core curriculum does nothing to mitigate it.

If we put aside the interpretation placed upon it by pupils, would the policy makers feel that the core curriculum has been a success? The assumption is that it ensures a skilled workforce equipped in those essential skills, which are necessary for employment in a highly competitive international environment.

On those few measures of research that policy makers recognise or allow, they would conclude that whilst the results are at best, mixed, this is because they have not been insistent enough in the delivery of the core, hence the literacy hours from which no-one can escape. The constant new policy initiatives do suggest not only a political restlessness, but an

admission that not all is as good as it should be, or there would not be such need for change. A more general disquiet is also powerfully felt, if not so strongly researched. Anecdotal evidence suggests that despite the initiative on literacy and numeracy, the skills that young people bring with them out of school are falling. Whilst this can be blamed for all kinds of other factors, from spell-checkers to decimalisation, standards are lower than they should be.

What seems to be missing are the uses to which literacy and numeracy should be put, not so much the skills for their own sake, but their application carried out with panache and belief.

It could be argued, as civil servants often do, that the policy of the core curriculum has the opposite effect to that intended. If we explore the effects on the pupils themselves, this conclusion is inescapable. They view learning in a purely pragmatic way. They feel disenfranchised from discussing what they are doing and why. They are forced to concentrate on utilitarian tasks, which are not invariably exciting or interesting. They lack a sense of inner purpose to which they are committed. Pupils learn, in fact, many latent messages from the core curriculum and the way in which it is delivered.

There is, however, one mitigating fact about the core curriculum. Although it is true that the centralised control of the curriculum is recent, together with the insistence on dictating teaching styles as well as targets, the core curriculum has been with us a long time. The three 'Rs,' the symbols of differentiated learning for the underprivileged placed into the hands of the state, are still with us.

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